

MIME-Version: 1.0

Date: Wed, 14 Jul 1999 01:04:35 EDT

Reply-To: Experimental Film Discussion List
FRAMEWORKS@LISTSERV.AOL.COM>

Sender: Experimental Film Discussion List FRAMEWORKS@LISTSERV.AOL.COM>

From: DHHunter@AOL.COM

Subject: Re: Sorry, it matters: you can't wish it away

To: FRAMEWORKS@LISTSERV.AOL.COM

I know I am jumping in a bit late on the discussion, but Corey wrote:

As Valerie Soe has already pointed out, "what you have to say about film" is not likely to be so disinterested that these other factors don't matter. Wasn't what Bazin had to say about film related to his Catholicism, for instance? What you are asking for is a critical detachment that -- at least in my original training in literary criticism -- no one has really believed possible or argued for in something like 50 years. It's a simple political and cultural reality that those who are ALLOWED and even ENCOURAGED not to care about what anyone's gender, race, religion, etc. are have been straight white men, and since it's taken a long hard fight for gay people (or women, or minorities) to speak up and say that their views should count too, it's very disturbing to hear someone ask that all of that be put back into a closet so that "pure" aesthetic discourse can reign once more. I don't care what you do in bed, but I do care if your sexual orientation links up with your aesthetic claims and evaluations -- and if you really believe that that never happens, well, that simply claims that a couple of generations of feminists, minority, and gay and lesbian critics were wrong. This is not written in anger or as attack, but I must admit this is a tired response to the (one more time!) assertion of critical neutrality that not even straight white men cling to these days.>>

This post got me interested, not so much for its reactionary and reductive tone but because it helped me see how much my own thought has changed over the

years. In the late 80's I may have posted something very similar to what Corey wrote for I was trained in lit crit of the thematic school, feminist, queer etc . . . (perhaps in a similar manner to you Corey) but turned away from it eventually because as my critical eye developed I came to see how thematic criticism rarely engages in close textual analysis, rarely takes any given work at more than the face value of its "content" to the extent that authors such as Bell Hooks and Sharon Willis not only often stand on shaky critical ground but they misdescribe the book, painting or film they are writing about on the basic material level.

Second I also became frustrated when people such as Barbara Hammer among

others created work of great depth and sophistication only to have their work reduced to being advertisements for gay rights in critical articles and essays celebrating the work. Is gay rights an important issue? darn toot'n it is but art is more than the politics of the audience that claims the work as its own. Otherwise I would never have developed such great appreciation for Barbra's work. At some point I think it's o.k. to stop saying "gay art", "black art" "feminist art" and just admit that these people are doing strong work that does not need to be qualified. In all honestly doesn't the label "feminist artist" on some level, maybe very deeply hidden, imply the condescension "not bad art for a chick."

In the end it just seems clear to me that there is very little that one can say from a thematic position that isn't obvious and that aesthetic criticism although far from pure or neutral (why would purity or neutrality be desirable anyway?) is the best way to get into a work and understand it as a work of art. And finally, aesthetic analysis in no way prevents political or social discussions, but I do think that thematic criticism is invested in preventing aesthetic analysis.

-Douglas

For info on FrameWorks, contact Pip Chodorov at PipChod@aol.com>.

Date: Wed, 14 Jul 1999 03:48:50 EST
Reply-To: Experimental Film Discussion List
FRAMEWORKS@LISTSERV.AOL.COM>
Sender: Experimental Film Discussion List FRAMEWORKS@LISTSERV.AOL.COM>
From: mwalsh@mail.hartford.edu
Subject: "thematic" vs "aesthetic"
To: FRAMEWORKS@LISTSERV.AOL.COM

Dear Douglas,

No, the term "feminist artist" does not in principle imply condescension. Some feminist artists are brilliant (Chantal Akerman, Su Friedrich) and some are crap; this is true of any subdivision in art, e.g. avant-gardists, academic poets, rappers, what have you. Of course there are people whose art gets attention largely because it's feminist, but that is also true of all the other categories. If you want to even-handedly decry this kind of unfairness, take on mainstream literature, where all kinds of dullards function

as poets and novelists mainly because they are mainstream. But your binary between the "thematic" (by which you seem to mean "political") and the "aesthetic" suggests that you're not likely to take me up on this. So let me try another tack: I would not myself look to bell hooks for finely nuanced close readings of *Meshes of the Afternoon* or *Zorns Lemma* or *Life Wastes Andy Hardy*, but I don't conclude that she is somehow the enemy of the aesthetic, and I don't see why you do.

Michael Walsh

For info on FrameWorks, contact Pip Chodorov at PipChod@aol.com>.

1.0

Date: Wed, 14 Jul 1999 04:38:46 -0600

Dave W wrote:

>Thank you Douglas. You have explained my point about 'platforms' being
>degrading better than I could have hoped to. I feel vindicated.

But David, Douglas' point does not relate to your point, as I recall it, about platforms degrading an argument or point of view.

Douglas wrote

>thematic

>criticism rarely engages in close textual analysis, rarely takes any given

>work at more than the face value of its "content"

This has very little to do with the earlier discussion, which was not about the value of thematic criticism (as it is too loosely defined here) but about whether it is valuable in to cite different perspectives when giving a critical/historical appraisal. (Or, more specifically, whether a relatively monolithic notion of porn in America could benefit from some knowledge of the role of porn in gay culture--and aesthetics--which has had direct influences on the A-G). To feel vindicated (back to David), you would have to demonstrate how doing so actually degrades an argument or critical position.

>Is gay rights an important issue? darn toot'n it is

>but art is more than the politics of the audience that calims the work as its

>own.

A couple of things are getting confused here. But in a nutshell, I would respond, in relation to the discussion as it has played out, is that there is more to "the audience that claims the work as its own" than politics. I think that Jerry alluded to gay culture and aesthetics, not just "politics," which undermines Douglas' simplistic opposition between political and aesthetic commentary.

> In all honestly doesn't the lable
>"feminist artist" on some level. maybe very deeply hidden, imply the
>condesention "not bad art for a chick."

(to Douglas) Implied by whom (feminists, you)? Implied for whom (everyone)? Who is being condescending? You would have to answer these questions (and demonstrate some kind of logic) for this claim to carry any weight.

> And finally, aesthetic analysis in no way prevents political
>or social discussions, but I do think that thematic criticism is inversed in
>preventing aesthetic analysis.

So, in what ways was Corey practicing "thematic criticism" by simply stating that

>What you are asking for is a critical detachment that -- at
>least in my original training in literary criticism -- no one has really
>believed possible or argued for in something like 50 years.

of course you could accuse him of ignoring the text in his post, because he was trying to talk about something else--the notion of critical detachment. But why don't you wait until he actually offers some comments about "the text" to see what he does or does not allow for (Corey, how can you make the world safe from aesthetic analysis today?)

James Kreul

X-Sender: creekmur@blue.weeg.uiowa.edu

Mime-Version: 1.0

Date: Wed, 14 Jul 1999 11:43:56 -0500

Reply-To: Experimental Film Discussion List
FRAMEWORKS@LISTSERV.AOL.COM>

Sender: Experimental Film Discussion List FRAMEWORKS@LISTSERV.AOL.COM>

From: Corey Creekmur corey-creekmur@UIOWA.EDU>

Subject: thematic vs. textual: HUH???

To: FRAMEWORKS@LISTSERV.AOL.COM

Having been away from the computer for a few days, anything I have to add might seem dated, and in any case I'm apparently stuck in the late 80s anyway (thank god I got out of the 60s, or the early 1800s, unlike others on the list!); anyway, I'm responding to the following:

In the late 80's I may have posted something very similar to what Corey >wrote for I was trained in lit crit of the thematic school, feminist, queer >etc . . . (perhaps in a similar manner to you Corey) but turned away from it >eventually because as my critical eye developed I came to see how thematic >criticism rarely engages in close textual analysis,

I just don't recognize this opposition, not at least in the work that matters to me -- could you really want film criticism more political and detailed than Steven Heath's?? Since a great deal of early feminist criticism including Mulvey's was an attempt to demonstrate the work of shot patterns, how were it's thematic interests getting in the way of close analysis?? Are queer film critics Alexander Doty, Thomas Waugh, or Richard Dyer guilty of imprecision?? (not in my reading of them) Hasn't the curious thing about Robin Wood's career for many years now been his balance of gay activism and Leavis-derived close reading? I could go on, and don't mean to endorse all of the work of these critics uncritically, but this false opposition doesn't ring true to me -- isn't the most common complaint about Wisconsin neo-formalism that it's close textual analysis that rarely engages in thematic concerns?? (a simplistic claim I wouldn't actually endorse) I don't see this response as a rejection of your claims, but as a statement of incomprehension: sure I can name some "thematic" critics who don't pay much attention to details of the text, but they aren't the ones I read or use. Corey

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DHHunter@AOL.COM

Thu, 15 Jul 1999 10:19:29 EDT

The issue in

my previous post was not "some people should not speak" rather I was addressing the question of "How do we speak from the position of greatest power?" Obviously this is a personal decision and I have NEVER attempted to tell anyone how or where to speak. But when I speak about the art or artists whose work I love I owe it to them to speak about structure, aesthetics, content, themes, formal organization, the use of space, time narrative, camera movement, philosophical implications etc, etc, etc, etc, and a whole

range of issues that just are not captured under labels such as "black art" or "feminist art" but they are captured by the term "art". Let me be clear to speak of "art" is not to attempt to diminish the significance or importance of the qualifiers "black" "feminist" or "gay" but if the work is good work it will NECESSITATE a consideration and a focus on these factors REGARDLESS of one's starting point. In the same breath I also refuse to totalize the work in question by the fact of the existence of the above mentioned qualifiers. So while you may think that Barbara Hammer is just another lesbian film maker I think she is a great artist, period. An artist who's work needs to be widely studied and celebrated and understood.

-Douglas